

Substance and Style in the Prolife Discourse

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THE CURRENT DISCOURSE ON ABORTION is so fraught in part because one's position on the legality and morality of the issue has become the litmus test of a person's character. Articles and social media posts abound asking, "Can I be friends with a prolife or prochoice person?"¹ The demonization of the "other side," whatever that may be, is *de rigueur* post-*Dobbs*.

This short essay is directed to the prolife community, of which I am a member. It argues that the abortion discourse on Catholic campuses will be improved significantly if the prolife community more intentionally integrates specific substantive and stylistic changes regarding the ethics and politics of abortion. Throughout the essay, I use the term "prolife" as Catholics should use it; to signify what Joseph Cardinal Bernardin called a "consistent ethic of life."² To be prolife is not only to be pro-birth but also to be for whatever befits the integral wellbeing of all members of the human community, such as just wages, universal access to healthcare, and an adequate social safety net.

THE SUBSTANCE OF THE DISCOURSE

Human personhood and intrinsic dignity rightly are perennial considerations of the prolife community. However, to civilize the conversation, I invite this community to expand the substance of its discourse in two areas.

First, the impasse in the discourse may be initially bridged by what many prolife and prochoice persons should generally agree on—that abortion is driven by vicious social structures and a broken moral culture. Abortion is primarily a socially-generated moral problem that requires a socially-generated moral solution. While prudential legislation is one part of the solution, the structural and cultural conditions that drive abortion are

¹ Janay Kingsbury, "The End of Roe is Changing Friendships—For Better or for Worse," *Washington Post*, June 22, 2022, www.washingtonpost.com/life-style/2022/07/31/friendships-abortion-roe/.

² Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, "A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American-Catholic Dialogue," Gannon Lecture, New York City, December 6, 1983, www.hnp.org/publications/hnpfocus/BConsistentEthic1983.pdf.

more important. Abortions will continue post-*Dobbs*, even for women in states that ban abortion, because *Dobbs* does nothing to address the underlying social factors that drive abortion. On this point members of the prolife and prochoice communities should have much in common. Each should recognize and lament how a broken social safety net, economic oppression, sexism, and racism so constrain women's agency that, according to prochoice persons, women require legal access to abortion.

As a 2005 study showed, "the reasons most frequently cited" by women who procured abortions "were that having a child would interfere with a woman's education, work or ability to care for dependents (74%); that she could not afford a baby now (73%); and that she did not want to be a single mother or was having relationship problems (48%)."³ Women are acutely aware of the social penalties they pay in American society when they have children in sub-optimal conditions. Opposition to the structural injustices that mothers encounter should be a point of mutual agreement among members of the prolife and prochoice communities. One can even imagine how these communities could collaborate to transform these structures of sin into structures of virtue. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. provides a practical way forward. He urged the members of the civil rights movement to focus on the structural "forces of evil," not those persons who supported racist policies.⁴ The prolife community would do well to combat the structurally vicious causes of abortion, not those who support a legal right to it.

Second, in light of the social factors that drive abortion, the prolife community should take seriously the experiences of women who have abortions and express more compassion toward them. Unfortunately, as Pope Francis has acknowledged, the prolife community has done "little to adequately accompany women in very difficult situations, where abortion appears as a quick solution to their profound anguish, especially when the life developing within them is the result of rape or a situation of extreme poverty. Who can remain unmoved before such painful situations?"⁵ In 1983 Lutheran theologian Karen Lebacqz recognized the same reality and argued that "if abortion is a tragedy, it is partly because of the lack of support that we—the Christian community—offer to women who find themselves with unwanted or burdensome pregnancies ... The issue is one of covenant and

³ Lawrence B. Finer, Lori F. Frohworth, Lindsay A. Dauphinee, Susheela Singh, and Ann M. Moore, "Reasons US Women Have Abortions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives," *Guttmacher Institute* 37, no. 3 (2005): 110, www.guttmacher.org/journals/psrh/2005/reasons-us-women-have-abortions-quantitative-and-qualitative-perspectives.

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Experiment in Love," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 18.

⁵ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 214, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

community. What kind of people are we, and who do we wish to become?"⁶

The prolife community should "wish to become" more compassionate with respect to the "painful situations" pregnant women endure. This community all too often quickly dismisses the suffering of women and, instead, trains its attention nearly exclusively on the unborn child. Both the mother and unborn child are victims of injustice and deserving of compassion and mercy. These virtues will only be elicited if prolife persons regularly listen to women's suffering, whether communicated by women themselves or their advocates in the prochoice community. Hopefully, such listening will spur the prolife community to practice the works of mercy and fight for social justice for women and children.

THE STYLE OF DISCOURSE

Finally, the mode of the discourse should reflect the message. Because the prolife message is a message of love, members should communicate it lovingly. Such a mode does not preclude disagreement and debate when discussing abortion. However, when one engages the prochoice community with love, one provides an embodied witness to the universal call to charity—a call that extends to those with whom one disagrees, to mothers, and the unborn. This mode carries a considerable rhetorical advantage because, as Pope Paul VI rightly argued, people listen "more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if [they do] listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."⁷ Speaking the truth about the dignity of all persons while respecting the dignity of one's interlocutor provides an embodied pedagogy more likely to convince others. Conversing with the prochoice community with love not only reflects good moral theology, but it also works.

Dialoguing with love is opposed to the "culture warrior" ethos that currently plagues our nation. Both King and Bernardin rejected the culture war. King invited the civil rights movement to "not [seek] to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding."⁸ Bernardin argued that the prolife community should "maintain our civil courtesy. We should be vigorous in stating a case and attentive in hearing another's case; we should test everyone's logic but not question his or her motives."⁹ Members of the prochoice community are neither "deplorable" nor "evil." Christians are called to judge actions, not persons. The prolife community should listen to

⁶ Karen Lebacqz, "Abortion: Getting the Ethics Straight," *Logos* 3 (1982): 58.

⁷ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41, www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html.

⁸ King, "Experiment in Love," 18.

⁹ Bernardin, "Consistent Ethic of Life."

and respectfully dialogue with prochoice persons because they, like all persons, are God-loved. **M**

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